

I-Relationships: Do We Need It or Does It at all Matter?

Sherry L. Xie¹²³[0000-0003-2345-0488]

¹ School of Information Resource Management, Renmin University of China, China, 100872

² Center for Digital Records Management Research, China

³ Key Laboratory of Data Engineering and Data Knowledge, Ministry of Education of China
sherrylix@outlook.com

Abstract. This Visions paper asks questions about the relationships between the cores and boundaries of the disciplines/fields of the iSchool constituent members, that is, I-relationships, and argues for the necessity of them being asked. The questions themselves may not be entirely new, but they may deserve new considerations in the context of the iSchool movement and correspondingly, today's rapidly changing world. The paper hopes to draw attentions from like-minded colleagues so that further discussions can be invoked and material collaborations can be forged.

Keywords: I-relationships, I-theories, Disciplinary Core, Disciplinary Boundary.

1 The iSchools Vision & Questions

The iSchool movement was originated by the idea that the traditional library and information science (LIS) schools had the capacity “to reach a broader audience of students and to prepare professionals for work beyond libraries” [1]. The iSchool Caucus, following on that idea, envisions to “maximize visibility and influence of its member schools, and their interdisciplinary approaches to harnessing the power of information and technology, and maximizing the potential of humans” [2]. Good and exciting news for the traditional LIS schools. Visibility and influence enhance comparative advantages in terms of attracting new students, new faculty members, and new research funds, which are certainly desired by all schools. There are questions about this vision, however. For example, how can we know that the vision is making its way into reality and is doing its job for all member schools? The number of iSchools is growing and the iConference is held annually, but do we know the real impact of this new movement? More specifically, how is the overarching term “information” adding visible and influential progresses to the iSchool member schools and their affiliates? And how can the progresses, if any, be measured and reported so they can be compared with traditional performances? All in all, can we know or how should we know about the “before” and “after” states of the iSchools?

2 The I-Ambiguities & Related Questions

The term information has not in history offered sufficient assistance to the explanations of information sciences, information disciplines, information studies or information fields as we call them varyingly in the LIS field – far from the clarity that it has offered to the information theory field. The scopes and boundaries of the information theory field are to a sufficient degree clear with the help of the meaning of information in that context, which allows us to comfortably eliminate it from our focus of teaching and/or research when we know that communication technologies are not our thing. To take the definition of information provided by the ISO standard 2382 as a convenient example, which defines information as in the context of information theory as “knowledge which reduces or removes uncertainty about the occurrence of a specific event from a given set of events” and the term “event” is to be understood “as used in the theory of probability” [3]. Information outside this context is nothing like that. To use the same standard’s definition of information defined with respect to “information processing”, which reads “knowledge concerning objects, such as facts, events, things, processes, or ideas, including concepts, that within a certain context has a particular meaning” [3]. As such, the meaning or understanding of information here relies solely on the “certain context”, which, for both teaching and conducting research, requires not only a spelling-out of details for a specific case but also establishments of theoretical constructs (that is, I-theories). Such theoretical establishments, however, cannot be currently considered as adequately existing in terms of rigor and coherence. According to the information entry in the latest edition of the Encyclopedia of Library and Information Sciences, the concept “information” is of signal importance to all the information disciplines, yet:

- [I]t is a term that has been defined in countless ways over many decades. [T]here is no widely agreed-upon definition or theoretical conception of the term. The meaning of this term is still highly contested (Introduction of the entry); and
- The much-debated concept of information remains at the lively heart of information science (Conclusions of the entry) [4].

The sentiment here can be easily found in other places. For example, the 2013 edition of the Introduction to Information Science describes information as a “tricky” concept, which “can have many different meanings, and can be understood in many different ways”, and “[t]he best way to understand the concept of ‘information’ has been debated for many years” [5]. It cites also the argument of John Feather and Paul Sturges that information is “probably the most used, and the least precisely understood, term in the library and information world” [5]. This I-ambiguities brings up (again) the question: do we need to delineate relationships between and among the disciplines/fields now all under the banner of information (that is, I-relationships)? It should not be difficult to image some answers from the LIS audiences when facing this question, for example: 1) The banner of information is just a shorter version of information sciences or information disciplines, therefore, if there was not a relationship crisis for the information schools in the past, there should not be one for today’s iSchools either, and 2) some disciplines/fields are readily distinguishable, for example, computer science vs. all the others. I myself has been a long-term subscriber to these answers (and the like), but for

the iSchool movement, I convinced myself that these answers are not good enough. For the first answer, for example, the absence of a relationship crisis among all the information related fields in the past should not be considered as capable of denying the long existence of confusions with disciplinary boundaries and also, should not be leaned on as the guarantee that there will not be a crisis in the (near) future. Considering the rapidly changing digital world and the unstoppable continuation of globalization (if we are confident that eventually the world will still move forward), how can we be certain that no threats will ever be posed to a field that is trying to encompass everything (the putting together of “information”, “technology” and “people” can be said including everything, not only for today’s world but pretty much for the entire human history), yet choosing to ignore the ambiguities fundamental to its disciplinary stance? In addition, under the encompassing information banner, it is easy to observe that the various constituent fields are still siloed with each other and there are no wide-spread collaborations for teaching or for doing research.

According to the entry on information science in the same encyclopedia cited above, information science clearly does not include the field of records management [5], which is indeed part of the curricula of some iSchools including, for example, the iSchool@UBC and the iSchool@Renmin University of China (RUC). According to the entry Sociology of the Information Disciplines (the only entry on information disciplines and it does include a session entitled “The Information Disciplines: Scope and Definition”), information disciplines are represented by “librarianship, archivistics, records management, bibliography and textual studies, document-type studies, social studies of information use, and museum studies” as well as “information science, information systems design, knowledge management, and informatics” [6]. All of these fields require explanations not only on themselves but also on their relationships with each other – which do not currently exist with any sufficient clarity. For outsiders, it is a miracle that the information field has thrived over all the ambiguities existing in its key concepts and scopes, but we know among ourselves that we continue to exist because we have been employing specifics for communications. When we talk about what we do – not just what we care about or what we want to be – in front of perspective students, potential collaborators, and family members, we (need to) use specifics of course content, research focuses even research questions to make us clear. The encompassing term information in these scenarios offers no utility. This method of making ourselves clear to our audience via specifics of our own has helped with our continued existence; such existence, however, was conditioned on the fortunate (or unfortunate indeed?) fact that no challenges had come from the other discipline/fields, who may eventually claim that they can do the same and do it better. Disciplinary cores and relationships are crucial in this regard.

For the second imaged answer, it is true that some of the disciplines/fields now included in iSchools can be understood without needing external help, which, however, does not make any less problematic of the unclear relationships among constituent disciplines. For example, organizational information management and organizational records management, what are their respective cores and where are the boundaries? Are the terms information and records entirely independent from each other in organizations or the term management operates fundamentally differently when associated with

organizational records and organizational information? According to the two studies that examined the conceptual relationships between records management and information management, and records management and information governance, both in the context of the United States records community, there were no fundamental differences existing for these terms (reported in SAA Annual Conference in 2017). According to the study that examined the programs of records management and information security in the context of the United States Federal Government, the records management field, which was established much earlier than the information security program and with a much broader mandate, should have been given a supervisory role over the program of information security because of the strong indication of the existence of a RM-IS inclusive relationship [7]. In reality, however, the information security community proposed to eliminate records management in their operation. The study concluded that the convenient use of the term information was a major factor, where the term “convenient” refers to the observations that 1) the key concepts of federal information, federal records, information management, information resources, information resources management were not meaningfully distinguished and 2) their usages did not necessarily follow the definitions and/or did not display consistence. This convenient use created the impression that ambiguity can take all, which neatly corresponds to the iSchools Vision. However, ambiguity is the enemy of policy implementation, and failed policy implementation will likely cast doubt on the disciplines and professions that backed up the policies. If the government does not care about such ambiguity and the consequences brought by it, should the iSchools movement instead?

3 The Down-to-Earth Utility of Disciplinary Clarity

To argue for the necessity of clarities in disciplinary boundaries does not mean to defend for the existence of a particular field. On the contrary, clearer boundaries make comparatively simple and straightforward the retirement of a field or a merger of it with others. Clarities in disciplinary boundaries enable the formation and articulation of rational for decision-making, and in this sense, it is equally necessary for existing fields and the ones that are emerging. For the emerging ones, sufficient analyses of relevant existing fields are the only bases for their acceptance or endorsement by others and the only effective ways of laying out their exceptional disciplinary and professional cores. It is unfortunate to witness that some of the so-called new, emerging fields have ignored considerably the existence of relevant, long-existing fields when claiming their emergence – for example, the “information governance” field. For the existing ones, it should be their disciplinary responsibilities to maintain a sufficient clarity in their cores and boundaries, in particular when there are updates and advancements.

The field of electronic/digital records management, the updates and advancements to the traditional paper-based records management, can be used as an illustrative example there. The records community started its endeavor on electronic (now digital) records in the first half of the last century and has ever since worked on the challenges that such records have brought along. In the process, the records management discipline and practices was faced with the competitions from fields of document management, data

management, content management, information resource management, information management, information governance, freedom of information administration, electronic discovery, etc., yet, discussions addressing these competitions never reached the center of attention, and the scarce discussions largely remained within the walls of the records community and rarely reached out to those competing fields for clarification or debate. Who is to blame for the intellectually unjustifiable emergence of organizational information management as an independent field? Organizational records management. And who permitted the intellectually unjustifiable supervisory role of organizational information management over organizational records management? Again, organizational records management. Phenomena as such do not just cause conceptual confusions, there are real consequences – for both education and practice. According to the eight master thesis projects conducted in the iSchool@Renmin University of China during the years of 2015-2018, information, and now (big) data, has been taking over the territories of records and archives despite the fact that there are in existence a national archives act and an administrative order on managing electronic records. In the subject areas of Freedom of Information, online government services provision, government integrity establishment, networked healthcare development, personal data protection, precision in poverty production, etc., information or (big) data dominates, and typically, no references were made to existing electronic records management requirements as stipulated by the Order or to requirements issued by the State Archives Administration of China. Among all the central government ministers and all the local governments examined, only one province issued policies dedicated to the management of electronic records in the context of providing online government services. Again, the issue is not about the dominance of information/data or records, but about the legitimacy of such dominance in terms of solid conceptual foundations. Information (in organizations) and (big) data (except for data in database) have no established academic bases in China, nor do they have legislative endorsement for their operation. Can the new family of iSchool offer any help to this situation? Or, does it not matter as long as the term information is used? Or, is there the potential to rename the iSchool to d(ata)School in the near future, maybe first in China, as data bureaus are been rapidly established around the country?

4 Unconventional Help to Disciplinary Mutual Understanding

In tight relationship with the discussing-within-its-own-community phenomenon are the academic practices of journal scoping and blinded peer review. Journals all have a defined scope, which is typically discipline based. No systematic studies concerning the impact of the iSchool movement on journal scoping considerations were found, but experience tells that articles on records management go typically still to journals dedicated to records or journals of library science (the traditional way), rarely those of information science (unless the article features quantitative methods) or information management (unless the presence of records is hidden in that of information, for example, records and information management). And of course, vice versa. The iConference has

a broad scope of accepting papers, however, the breadth of paper acceptance exhibits only the recognition of the program committee, not necessarily the attendees. Is it necessary for special measures to be devised to promote mutual understandings of the iSchools' constituent disciplines?

Blind peer review, whether single or double, is also a hurdle to the spreading of mutual understandings/awareness among the iSchools' constituent disciplines. Blindness ensures the freedom of criticism, which is necessary for academic rigor, but it introduces at the same time possible unfairness. Writers have no knowledge of the reviewers in terms of their expertise and journals do not typically make explicit their mechanisms of assessing reviewer expertise. Fairness, therefore, hinges on the trust endowed to editors and reviewers, especially when the opportunity of rebutting is not offered. For this long existing system, how about updating it with the idea of radical transparency? No doubt the absolute majority of editors and reviewers are fair and responsible, so what harm could the idea of open-about-our-academic-opinions cause? In the current environment where open science is increasingly making greater strides, will the iSchool community be open to it?

5 Conclusion & Again, Questions

The iSchool movement is not just about information, nor just about people or technology. It is about the “relationships” between the three [9]. To that end, should we try first to figure out the relationships among ourselves? Among data, information and records? Among records management, information management, information science and data science? For some of us now iSchoolers, it seems rather necessary to have the I-relationship clarity as the foundation for the “interdisciplinary approach” that the iSchool movement strongly promotes and the achievement of the four iSchool movement goals [10]. If the ambiguities in relationships are (still) considered insignificant by others, can we at least have more communications on this matter so that we can all have adequate understanding of it, thus being able to move forward together?

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